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MILTON'S 'ELM STAR-PROOF.'

A WRITER in the Contributors' Club of the November *Atlantic* enters into a brief discussion concerning the accuracy of Milton's epithet 'star-proof' as applied to the elm. The lines which contain the word are in *Arcades*, and run as follows :

Follow me as I sing
And touch the warbled string :
Under the shady roof
Of branching elm star-proof
Follow me.

It seems that Professor Schelling, in his collection of seventeenth century lyrics (p. 243), says that Milton is here guilty of 'a trifling inaccuracy,' since elms are not star-proof at all. The contributor to the *Atlantic* reminds him that Milton was speaking, not of the American, but of the English elm, of which several thick-leaved specimens, transplanted during the poet's youth by the colonists, are still to be seen on Boston Common. Professor Schelling was not the first to urge the point. He was anticipated by an Englishman—Mark Pattison—who, having in mind of course the English elm, says, in his *Life of Milton* (p. 23) : 'The elm, one of the thinnest foliaged trees of the forest, is inappropriately named star-proof.'

Then is Milton in error after all ? Other poets may be found who agree with him ; thus Ovid calls the elm *densa* (*Met.* 2. 257), the elm at the mouth of Vergil's Avernus is *opaca*, and Tennyson speaks of 'the full-foliaged elms' (*In Mem.* 95. 58).¹ What then are the facts concerning the English elm ? In his *Arboretum et Fructicetum Britannicum* (3. 1379), J. G. Loudon describes the *ulmus campestris*, the species by far the most common in England,

¹ In Verg. *Ecl.* 2. 70 the elm is *frondosa* ; cf. 'fecundæ frondibus ulmi' of *Georg.* 2. 446.

as putting forth 'rather slender branches, which are densely clothed with small deep green leaves.' Again he says that the tree is used for planting in avenues. 'For this purpose it is well adapted . . . from the denseness of the foliage.' He speaks of it as being, except the oak, the most frequent tree in the parks and pleasure-grounds of the English nobility and gentry. Evelyn, who writes in Milton's time, and who is well informed on these matters, says that the elm grows best, not in the forest, nor alone, but in hedgerows; 'for the elm is a tree of consort, sociable, and so affecting to grow in company, that the very best which I have ever seen do almost touch one another.'² One is reminded of the hedgerow elms in *L'Allegro* (58). Loudon's careful description and plates leave little doubt that Milton knew this variety of elm and described it faithfully.

One is now tempted to ask whether the poet had not in mind a definite group of elms. It will be remembered that *Arcades* was written for a particular occasion and place, namely, an open-air performance in the evening at Harefield Place, near Uxbridge in western Middlesex, in honor of the aged Countess Dowager of Derby. Milton would certainly not have committed the indiscretion of making the Genius of the Wood invite nymphs and shepherds to follow him beneath branching elms, while he actually walked under oaks or firs or in the open. Nor would he have made himself ridiculous by calling elms 'star-proof' which, as every one of the group gathered in the dusk on the lawn of Harefield would be sure to see, were quite the opposite. The evidence cited herewith is much of it referred to by Todd and Masson, but so far as I know has not been clearly focused upon the point under consideration. *Arcades* was not the first masque to be performed at Harefield. As is well known, Queen Elizabeth visited the place in 1602, and was splendidly entertained by its owners, the Lord Keeper Egerton and his lady, the same Countess of Derby who is celebrated in *Arcades*. The Queen was received with an elaborate masque, of which an authentic account in manuscript was handed down in the family of Egertons until some time in the eighteenth century during the life of Sir Roger Newdigate, a direct descendant, when it

² *Sylva* (ed. 1679), p. 32.

was lost for a period. In 1800, before the manuscript had been recovered, Lysons, the antiquarian, writes (*Historical Account of those Parishes in the County of Middlesex which are not described in the Environs of London*, p. 108) that Sir Roger Newdigate, in trying to recall its contents, recollects that the Queen 'was first welcomed at Dew's Farm by several allegorical persons, who attended her to a long avenue of elms leading to the house, which obtained from this circumstance the name of the Queen's Walk. Four trees of this avenue still remain (1800), and the greater part were standing not many years ago.' Lysons furnishes an engraving of Harefield in which the four elms are conspicuous, and, if the picture is to be trusted, they not only prove the truth in general of Milton's epithet, but suggest that it contained a local allusion of some force. Another engraving of Harefield in which the foliage is very thick appears in Nichols' *Progresses of Queen Elizabeth* (vol. 3. opp. p. 581), but when it was made (about 1820), the old avenue had entirely disappeared.³

The recovered account of the masque begins thus (Nichols 3. 586 ff.):

'After the Queene entered (out of the highway) into the Deamesne ground of Harefelde, near the Dayrie howse, she was mett with 2 persons . . . with the Speech. Her Majesty being on horsebacke, stayed under a tree (because it rayned) to heare it.' It would be interesting to know whether this waterproof tree were one of the avenue. The account seems to imply that it was not. The narrative proceeds: 'When her Maiestie was alighted from her horse, and ascended 3 steps neare to the entering into the house, a carpet and chaire there sett for her; Place and Time present themselves.' Place is a personification of Harefield, dressed 'in a partie-colored roobe, like the brick house,' and two or three times in the ensuing dialogue allusion

³In her *Gossip from a Muniment Room* (1898), p. 148, Lady Newdigate-Newdegate mentions Harefield church as standing 'in solitary beauty in an oasis of green meadow land, whilst behind it rises a noble background of fine old trees.' From Lysons' engraving it would appear that the 'fine old trees' belong to Harefield Place, which touches the church on the south and east sides. The church must have stood frequently in the shadow cast by the elms at the lower end of the Queen's Walk.

is apparently made to the shaded and bowery retirement of this seat. Furthermore the narrator leaves one to infer that it was under the shelter of the elms that the queen stood as she listened to the second part of the entertainment. However that may be, it is probable that when *Arcades* was performed thirty years later the stage was a spot where the smooth-enameled green was overhung by the great elms under which Elizabeth had been welcomed to Harefield House, and that Milton wrote with these elms in mind.

But the origin of this epithet 'star-proof,' as of many another epithet and phrase in Milton, is twofold. He has united his own observation of nature with reminiscences from other great poets. Thus Statius describes a grove near the House of Sleep as 'nulli penetrabilis astro' (*Theb.* 10. 85). The instance was cited by Warton in his note on the passage in *Arcades* more than a hundred years ago. He notices also that Spenser seems to imitate Statius in describing a grove in *Faery Queen* 1. 1. 7 as being not 'perceable with power of any starr.' The phrase just quoted from Statius lingered in Milton's mind, as is shown by his use of it in *Paradise Lost* 9. 1088, where he mentions 'highest woods impenetrable To star or sunlight.' It therefore seems likely that during some moment when he strolled beneath the Harefield elms, perhaps in the long twilight of a midsummer evening, the phrase from Statius and the line from Spenser's lovely description rang in the poet's ears, and reminiscence and experience becoming thus inseparable in his memory, exerted an equal influence in the moment when he conceived the line in *Arcades*.

Critics have been pleased at times to find in Milton's descriptions of nature a tendency to bookishness, under the influence of which he is said to betray now and then a dull indifference to natural beauty. Where this tendency is commented upon it is usually exaggerated. But a careful study of instances will, I think, show that Milton's bookishness is generally not a source of inaccuracy or dull conventionality, but that it is an element of almost prime importance in the rare beauty of his art. The passage under discussion is but one among many which illustrate Milton's peculiar method in this respect. In the course of his

vast reading he comes upon a phrase or line which, however clumsy or outworn it may seem to duller ears, reveals to him its peculiar power or sweetness. Then refining it, and touching it with the magic possessed only by those who look lovingly and unerringly upon nature herself, he fills it with new and perennial life.

So much for the origin of Milton's epithet, and his observation of English elms.

But the contributor to the *Atlantic* observes that American elms are not star-proof. In general this is true; there are exceptions, however, as one may testify who, wandering through the broad street of a Connecticut village, say in an evening of latter June, has passed from the starlight into a darkened aisle of aged elms, with trunks like pillars, and branches that lose themselves in the deep and unbroken vaulting of a shady roof. Let Milton's epithet occur to one at such a moment, and its beauty and exquisite precision, as applied even to American elms, will be sufficiently apparent.

Milton's allusion to the elms, then, is local. It suggests to the reader the possibility that the masque contains other allusions of the same kind. Murray's *Handbook of the Environs of London* (s. v. Harefield) says that the region is one of 'much quiet sylvan beauty. It lies in a valley with, on the one hand, uplands abounding in elms and oaks, . . . on the other, the little river [the Colne] flowing gently among broad willow-fringed meadows.' Murray also quotes Norden's description of Harefield (*Speculum Britanniae*): 'a fair house standing on the edge of the hill; the river Colne passing near the same, through pleasant meadows and sweet pastures, yielding both delight and profit.' It is this sort of landscape which one finds reflected throughout *Arcades*. The Genius of the Wood says in ll. 44 ff.:

I am the power
Of this fair wood, and live in oaken bower
To nurse the saplings tall, and curl the grove
With ringlets quaint, and wanton windings wove.

Again (l. 54):

I fetch my round
Over the mount and all this hallowed ground.

To these one may add the 'lonely shades' mentioned in line 42, and the 'high thicket' of line 58. Warton seems to think that 'Ladon's liliated banks' of line 96 is an implied allusion to the Colne. Two things are evident: that Milton has suggested throughout *Arcades* a background of just such rural beauty as he most enjoyed; and that the landscape is local, and corresponds to that which lay about Harefield House, where it was acted. From the exactness of his allusions it would seem almost certain that he had visited Harefield at least once, if not frequently, or at any rate—what seems less probable—that he had listened to vivid and exact descriptions of the place which deeply stirred his imagination.

This brings us to consider the somewhat vexed question of Milton's relation to the musician Henry Lawes, to the Countess Dowager of Derby, and to her descendants, the Egertons of Ashridge, who acted in *Comus*, and probably in *Arcades*. Just what these relations were, and how they sprang up, may remain a matter of conjecture for ever; this much, however, is certain. In 1631 or 1632 Milton began his five years' residence at Horton, a tiny village in the lower valley of the Colne, seventeen miles west of London, and not more than twelve miles down the river from Harefield. It is also certain that Lawes, who was teacher of music to the young Egertons, collaborated with Milton in the preparation of *Comus* in 1634 (cf. Lawes' letter of dedication prefixed to *Comus* in the edition of 1637, and reprinted below and in most modern editions), and in that year the masque was performed at Ludlow Castle in honor of the Earl of Bridgewater, father of the Egertons at his installation as Lord President of Wales. It is, however, undetermined whether Lawes was previously acquainted with Milton,⁴ or whether the Egerton family of Ashridge, being acquainted with both young men, brought them together in the collaboration of *Comus*, and thus founded the pleasant friendship between them; or whether possibly the intermediary was the Countess Dowager at Harefield herself. The first student to utter an opinion in the matter was apparently the Reverend Francis Peck, a man whose notions concerning Milton were sometimes eccentric, to say the

⁴ Cf. Masson's *Life* 1. 567.

least. In 1732 he writes that, 'being desired to provide an entertainment, and being well acquainted with Mr. Milton's abilities, he [Lawes] pitched on him to compose the masque.' In spite of its origin this opinion has hitherto been the favorite one. Now *Arcades* was pretty certainly composed in 1633, that is, about a year before *Comus*, and the natural inference is that if Lawes applied to Milton for the words of *Comus* in 1634, it was only a repetition of what he had done the year before in the case of *Arcades*. It is on this point that the students of Milton differ. Warton (edition, p. 132; cf. 128), would date Milton's acquaintance with Lawes only from the composition of *Comus*, intimating that Milton was employed on both *Arcades* and *Comus*, not because of any acquaintance with Lawes, but because he lived in the neighborhood of Harefield and Ashridge, and could be conveniently employed for the purpose. In point of fact, Horton is all of twelve miles from Harefield and twenty-five from Ashridge. Keightley, on the other hand, insists with some indignation that if Milton was thus employed by the Egertons or the Countess, or had anything to do with them, the relationship could have been only one of humiliating dependence, and that this the proud mind of the poet would never endure. Masson believes that *Arcades* and *Comus* sprang from Milton's acquaintance with Lawes, though he admits that personal acquaintance on the part of the poet with the Egertons and the Countess was quite possible.

While nothing can be proved, yet it seems that insufficient account has been taken of such scanty evidence in the matter as we already possess. I cannot resist the feeling that the Countess Dowager was personally acquainted with Milton when *Arcades* was written. In the first place, the local allusions in the masque seem rather to have been based upon actual familiarity with the charms of Harefield than upon mere hearsay. Secondly, the adoration of the Countess which prevails throughout *Arcades* seems personal in a degree which Milton would hardly have ventured had he not known and admired this venerable friend of poets. Imagine, for example, that he writes any of the following lines without being on terms of greater or less intimacy with the one to whom they refer :

This, this is she
 To whom our vows and wishes bend ;
 Here our solemn search hath end.
 Fame, that her high worth to raise
 Seemed erst so lavish and profuse,
 We may justly now accuse
 Of detraction from her praise ;
 Less than half we find expressed ;
 Envy bid conceal the rest.

I know this quest of yours and free intent
 Was all in honor and devotion meant
 To the great mistress of yon princely shrine,
 Whom with low reverence I adore as mine.

And yet such music worthiest were to blaze
 The peerless height of her immortal praise
 Whose lustre leads us, and for her most fit,
 If my inferior hand or voice could hit
 Inimitable sounds.

I will bring you where she sits
 Clad in splendor as befits
 Her deity.
 Such a rural queen
 All Arcadia hath not seen.

If the extravagance of such eulogy verges at times upon the playful—for so it appears—it is but another indication of the relationship already suggested. It is interesting to notice that in *Comus* Milton had a good opportunity to praise the Earl of Bridgewater if he had wished, and if he had known him sufficiently well. He has taken little advantage of it, and there is some probability that the two were not intimate, if indeed they had ever met. In his lovely *Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester*, which lady he probably never knew, Milton has been equally sparing of praise.

If, then, Milton was acquainted with the Countess, what was the origin of their friendship? Perhaps it came about through Lawes, though his business as instructor in music to the Egertons was not at Harefield, but at Ashridge, some thirteen miles further to the north. Masson suggests the possibility that some relative of Milton was connected with the service of the dowager's family. It may be that the necessary evidence in the matter

now lies buried in the rubbish of a muniment-room in some English country-house, or that it was burned up with Harefield House in 1660, when, it is said, Charles Sedley during a visit, insisted upon reading in bed, and was careless with his candle.

In 1637 *Comus* was published, not by Milton, but by Lawes, who prefixed to it a letter in which he dedicated it 'to the Right Honorable John Lord Viscount Brackley, son and heir-apparent to the Earl of Bridgewater,' in other words to the eldest of the Egerton children, the one who acted the part of the elder brother in *Comus* when it was performed in honor of his father at Ludlow Castle. The letter reads as follows :

My Lord,

This poem, which received its first occasion of birth from yourself and others of your noble family, and much honour from your own person in the performance, now returns again to make a final dedication of itself to you. Although not openly acknowledged by the author, yet it is a legitimate offspring, so lovely and so much desired that the often copying of it hath tired my pen to give my several friends satisfaction, and brought me to a necessity of producing it to the public view, and now to offer it up, in all rightful devotion, to those fair hopes and rare endowments of your much-promising youth, which give a full assurance to all that know you of a future excellence. Live, sweet Lord, to be the honour of your name; and receive this as your own from the hands of him who hath by many favours been long obliged to your most honoured parents, and, as in this representation your attendant Thyrsis, so now in all real expression,

Your faithful and most humble servant,

H. LAWES.

I think this letter leaves the impression that Milton, though he may have known the Countess at Harefield, was not intimate with the Egertons at Ashridge. Otherwise why should Lawes refer to him in the somewhat distant manner of the letter, or why should it not include some intimation at least of Milton's approval of such a dedication, and of his concurrence therein?⁵ If Milton knew the younger members of the family, and agreed with Lawes in his admiration of this particular member, he would hardly have lost this opportunity of showing his regard in a way which was neither fawning nor unmanly. But further conjecture seems at present unwarranted.

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⁵ Explained in part, perhaps, by Milton's modesty concerning his early work.